Bumstead, Josiah Freeman, b. 1797.

Mr. Bumstead's defence of his school-books in reply to Mr. S.S. Greene / J.F. Bumstead. -- [Boston : s.n., 1845]

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# MR. BUMSTEAD'S

# DEFENCE OF HIS SCHOOL-BOOKS

IN REPLY TO

# MR. S. S. GREENE.

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# REPLY.

In three pamphlets connected with the pending controversy between Mr. Mann and the "Association of Masters of the Boston Public Schools," Mr. S. S. Greene has referred to two books belonging to my Primary-School Series. In doing this, he seems to have misunderstood, in important particulars, the method of teaching children to read which is advocated in those books. This error is the more remarkable, inasmuch as he has apparently given the whole subject on which he treats, a profound investigation.

According to Mr. Greene's representation of the method of teaching to read advocated in my books, *children are to be taught whole words without any allusion whatever to their elements; and in this way, they may be taught to the extent of a thousand different words before receiving any knowledge whatever of their constituent parts—that is, of the forms, powers, and names of the letters. In fine, he represents the method to be one which treats our language as though it were symbolic—like the Chinese, for example.*

For the sake of conciseness, I have thus presented what I understand his statement to be, instead of quoting from the various pages in which he has set it forth. I hope, in bringing the statement into a brief space, I have done no injustice to its meaning.

That such a method has an advocate in me, is an assertion which is entirely gratuitous. So far from advocating, I condemn it altogether. Mr. Greene himself has a better opinion of it than I have, inasmuch as he evidently grants to it the virtue of being practicable. I regard it in no such light; but as impracticable, and wholly incongruous with the nature of our

language. It is an absurdity, in my view, which never was entertained and supported by any body, and never will be. There are but few, I trust, who unite with Mr. Greene in attributing it to me. Of the hundreds of committee-men and teachers who have introduced these books into their schools, not a single one, to my knowledge, has ever received the impression which Mr. Greene seems to have received; or has ever used the books, as he says they were designed to be used. *He* may have *counted* my words; *they* have done better—*weighed* them.*

In the very extracts made by Mr. Greene, and presented as his authority, there are expressions which directly conflict with the representation he has given: thus—"in which case no fear need be entertained that he will not *know* THE ALPHABET in sufficient season. It may be well, however, in the way of variety, occasionally to select a short word from a lesson, and teach him to *read* ITS LETTERS." Are these and similar expressions applicable to a symbolic language? Or do they imply an exclusion of the elements?

Again, Mr. Greene could in no way, as I think, give even speciousness to his argument, but by considering me as using the word *alphabet* in a very different sense from what I intended. I used this term (or, as equivalent, *the letters*) in that common and popular sense in which it is every day and every where understood and used. I meant by it, simply the *forms and names* of the twenty-six letters. Thus, a child is said to know the alphabet when he is able, on looking at the forms of the twenty-six characters, to call them, severally, by name. Thus, also, a certain child was once said to be "*totally ignorant of the alphabet,*" because she was supposed to be ignorant of the names of the letters.

In bringing to my aid, in the Primer, an extract from Mr. Mann's Second Report, I did not imagine that he was using the term alphabet, in any other than the ordinary sense. Had I supposed, for a moment, that he intended to exclude the elements, as he is now represented to have done, I should have avoided all reference to him on the subject.

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* Mr. Greene, speaking of the Primer, says, "It contains about a thousand different words, as ascertained by actually counting them." I have not thought it important to test the accuracy of his simple addition.

*Mr. Greene's grand mistake consists in supposing that I meant, in using the term alphabet, to include the* POWERS *of the letters; and that in recommending an exclusive attention, for a time, to whole words, I would avoid teaching the powers as well as the names.* But this I would not do, if I could; and I could not, if I would. For, as I view the matter, some knowledge of the powers of the letters *cannot* be long (if at all) excluded, when children are permitted to begin with whole words. For instance, the child who already knows the word *man*, on being taught the words *pan* and *fan*, must, of necessity, become acquainted with the power of each initial letter of the three words. The words *eye* and *ear* are among the first in the Primer. Each is immediately followed by its plural. Can the scholar possibly avoid learning one of the sounds of *s*? Thus from day to day progress is made until all the powers are learned. *Mr. Greene* may see, as his language implies that he does, how it *is* possible for the scholar to learn "a hundred, or a thousand, or ten thousand words" before he begins to learn the powers of the letters; but, for myself, I can only say, that the idea, even in relation to the minimum, is beyond my comprehension. The only way, known to me, in which there is any pretence for teaching to read, and in which the child must for a long time remain ignorant of the powers of the letters, is that of confining him, at first, to the learning of their names. *This* is the way, if there be any, to avoid the phonetic character of our language.

But I did not intend even the omission of the names of the letters, in the passage—"Throughout the whole book, then, let it be an invariable rule to have the attention of the child *first* directed to the whole word. Let the *first* exercise with every new page, be, the reading or pronouncing of the words, &c." On this quotation Mr. Greene places great reliance, in support of his error. I see not how I can make the language as it stands in the book, more intelligible to the good sense of Primary-school teachers—for whom it was specially designed; nor do I know how to throw light upon it for Mr. Greene, otherwise than by saying, that I simply intended to recommend that the pronunciation of the word should *precede*—not PREVENT—its spelling, or the naming of its letters; and that in my use of the word *first*, which occurs twice in that place, I did not intend to convey the idea of *only*.

Thus much in regard to those portions of the books which Mr. Greene has cited as his authority. It seems to me that a fair and reasonable construction of them authorizes a conclusion *directly the reverse* of that which he has drawn.*

But there are other portions, which, one would think, ought not to have escaped the notice of a sagacious eye.

The title page of one of the books begins in this wise: "My First School-Book, to teach me, with the help of my Instructer, to read and SPELL words."

In the directions to the Teacher, in the same book, are these passages, among others of similar character.

"The first fifteen words contain THE WHOLE ALPHABET in small letter. The *capitals* need be learned only as they are met with in the course of the book."

"The scholar may learn the whole fifteen [FIFTEEN] different words on pages 7–10, before any thing is said to him about the letters; or, if the teacher prefer, HE MAY BEGIN WITH THE LETTERS EARLIER."

"Spelling, as commonly practised in schools, is of no assistance whatever in the way of pronunciation, inasmuch as the *names of the letters* of a word are, in general, totally different from its *elementary sounds*. Directing a child who stumbles in pronouncing a word, to 'spell it' in the usual way, is only increasing his embarrassment. If ORAL SPELLING consisted, as it should, [AS IT SHOULD,] in uttering the ELEMENTARY SOUNDS, the case would be different."

"There are two ways of SPELLING—one that is apprehended by the *ear*, and the other by the *eye*. The former is the ordinary, and, to a great extent, the exclusive, method in primary schools. Whatever advantages it may possess, it is doubtless wanting in practical character. It trains the ear, and not the eye; and therefore is deceptive to those who suppose that an ability to utter the *names* of the letters of a word, necessarily secures PRACTICAL SPELLING, or an ability to place the *forms* of those letters in proper combination on paper. The latter method, on the contrary, is entirely practical. It is, in fact, *the* spelling of everyday life. And such is its superiority to the other, it may

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* I have omitted one thing. Mr. Greene, speaking of the Primer, says with emphasis, "*The alphabet, as such, is not even inserted in it.*" He refers, no doubt, to the fact, that the vertical column of letters, such as is usual in Primers, is omitted. I am indebted to one of Mr. Greene's associates for an anecdote in reply. He says, "I have somewhere heard of a *literal* lady who once passed severe censure upon an excellent Thanksgiving sermon, because the *word* thanksgiving no where occurred in it."

be safely affirmed, that a dozen words written from memory or dictation on a slate, is a more profitable exercise than the mere vocal spelling of fifty words.

Here it will be objected, that children, at so early an age, cannot write. But this is a mistake. At any rate, they can be taught to make some legible marks in imitation of the printed letter; and this, too, with much pleasure on their part, and little trouble on the part of the teacher. Experience has proved that the various characters represented on the picture-slate (see cover) can be made by these young learners. True, they will be, at first, ill-favored, and almost illegible; but encouragement and practice will every day improve them. This method of spelling, therefore, is believed to be indispensable, partially at least, to all those who would be sure of making their scholars GOOD SPELLERS."

The following is from the Primer.

"It is surprising how many difficult things children learn with ease, in an indirect, incidental, and imperceptible way. And teachers will find that, with hardly any direct effort on their part, the KNOWLEDGE OF THE LETTERS will come. While learning words, the pupil is becoming acquainted with the FORMS OF LETTERS, and is thus, in an important sense, learning them: while using the SLATE, as recommended in 'My First School-Book,' he must be LEARNING THE LETTERS, especially as, in connection with this exercise, the teacher has frequent occasion to mention their names; and, again, while listening to the SPELLINGS of those who are just before him in the school, he is still aided in this very thing:—thus, in various ways, it will be found that, even from the first, [FROM THE FIRST] he is really, though imperceptibly, making progress in ACQUIRING THE ALPHABET."

I believe the child is not to be found, possessing ordinary capacity and having been faithfully taught according to the directions contained in these books, who is not a good reader and speller.

I will only add, that connected with my series of books, there is a large sheet, called, "Table for use in training the Organs of Speech in Articulation," the express object of which is to make children perfect in the knowledge and practice of the ELEMENTARY SOUNDS. And that in one of the Spelling-books there is a more minute analysis of English Utterance, than I believe can be found in any other Primary-school book. I have reason to think that Mr. Greene has seen them both. The first sentence of the latter is in these words:

Date Due



"A simultaneous exercise by a *whole school* in the ELEMENTARY SOUNDS OF THE LANGUAGE, will be found interesting, as well as highly useful."

The method of teaching to read, advocated in my books, differs, it is true, from the old and prevailing one. The difference consists, however, not in excluding, or even postponing, a knowledge of the true elements of reading; but in beginning to teach them, practically, at an EARLIER—at the EARLIEST POSSIBLE—period. While the child in the one case is learning the names of the letters, in the other, he learns not only their names, but many of their powers. I cannot conceive how this method can deprive the language of any of its phonetic character, or violate any common-sense principle. The unfortunate inference which Mr. Greene has drawn from his examination of my books, is, to me, an extraordinary fact. I am sure, if he had ever spoken to me on the subject, I could have shown him his error, and saved him from the publication of it. As the father of one of his pupils, I earnestly hope that other books in his hands do not meet with similar misapprehension.

J. F. BUMSTEAD.

*Boston, July*, 1845.